North Korea remains a mystery to many due to controlled communications with the outside world, with a belligerent dictatorship harboring nuclear weapons and committing human rights abuses. However, we can examine its history to understand underlying trends behind current events. In this lecture course with group discussions and activities, we investigate a crucial period of Korean history from the late 19th century until the present, where fierce cultural pride alongside near-constant foreign pressure often influenced Korean relations with the outside world. Dubbed the "Hermit Kingdom" by past Western observers, Korean leaders have alternately embraced and repelled the outside world. A four-decade history of colonial rule under imperial Japan, with independence movements arising after 1919 in Korea and Manchuria, fostered ideas of resistance and the seeds of the postwar Communist movement in northeast Asia. Postwar collapse of the Japanese empire after 1945 was followed by division into northern and southern sectors under Soviet and American occupation. The Korean War (1950-1953), aided by the superpowers as a proxy war, further reinforced northerners' negative views of outside intervention. This attitude continues into the present, where North Korea perpetuates the Kim family leadership dynasty under a quasi-Confucian dictatorship sustained by illegal economic means.
We will read texts by historians, journalists, defectors, Congressional Research Service (CRS) staff, a revolutionary poet, and sociologist, while critically examining Korea's divided history in interdisciplinary materials, including films, cartoons, and Youtube videos.